ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS EMERGING FROM THE ASSESSMENT IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

After a short presentation of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, this paper provides a summary of the inputs and the key issues that emerged during the Agency project Assessment in Inclusive Settings. The article shows how assessment represents a crucial element to increase the participation of all pupils in the process of learning, including those pupils with special educational needs, and consequently, for the development of inclusive education. The article brings to the fore the critical role played by the concept of inclusive assessment, with a particular focus on the notion of assessment for Learning and its application for pupils with special educational needs.

Keywords: Inclusive assessment – Assessment for learning – Special educational needs – Inclusion

ESTRATTO

Dopo una breve presentazione della European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (Agenzia Europea per lo Sviluppo dell’Educazione nei Bisogni Educativi Speciali), l’articolo propone una sintesi dei principali temi e indirizzi emersi da uno dei progetti promossi dall’Agenzia e denominato Assessment in Inclusive Settings (La valutazione nei contesti scolastici inclusivi). L’articolo rende evidente come il tema della valutazione sia un elemento cruciale per accrescere la partecipazione di tutti gli alunni nel processo di apprendimento, inclusi coloro con bisogni educativi speciali, e, conseguentemente, per la promozione e lo sviluppo di una scuola pienamente inclusiva. L’articolo mette in risalto il ruolo chiave che il concetto di «Valutazione inclusiva» può svolgere, con particolare riferimento all’approccio della «Valutazione per l’apprendimento» e come tale approccio possa essere applicato anche agli alunni con bisogni educativi speciali.

Parole chiave: Valutazione inclusiva – Valutazione per l’apprendimento – Bisogni educativi speciali – Inclusione

* Project materials including reports, articles and discussion papers are available for downloading from the Agency new website: http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/assessment-in-inclusive-settings (last accessed: September, 2009).
1. Introduction

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education is an independent, self-governing organisation established by member countries to act as a platform for collaboration in the field of special needs education. Although early Agency documents and reports very clearly refer to special educational needs, with the focus being upon pupils and their difficulties, Agency work is now centred upon systems and provision and not upon specific types or categories of needs. The Agency’s ultimate aim is to improve educational policy and practice for learners with special educational needs across Europe with a focus on the educational environment and how the environment should be equipped to meet a range of pupil abilities and needs. This aim takes into account issues surrounding debates on inclusive education such as equal opportunities, accessibility and the promotion of quality of education.

Since 1996, Agency work has been focussed upon a number of priority thematic topics related to the further development of special needs education and inclusion in European countries. Among with the thematic areas identified by Representative Board Members “Assessment for inclusion” was highlighted as a priority for investigation and development in the coming years. With this in mind, the project “Assessment in Inclusive Settings” project was carried out.

In general, the project aimed to develop a knowledge base of information on assessment policies and practice in the participating countries and to identify and examine innovative examples. The innovative examples emerging from the project aimed to provide recommendations and guidelines for assessment in inclusive settings.

To put it simply, one important intention of the project was to raise awareness of assessment issues in inclusive settings with general (non-special needs education) assessment policy makers in order for them to consider how all assessment policies need to account for pupils with special educational needs.

2. The Assessment in Inclusive Settings project: rationale, participants and methodology

When discussing “assessment” we refer to a particular pedagogical function which aims at collecting information about students’ learning experience, and which is different from the assessment of education systems and/or schools that for the scope of our project, we have chosen to identify with the term “evaluation”. Drawing on the Keeves/UNESCO (1994) document:

“(...) assessment is understood to refer to determinations and judgements about individuals (or sometimes small groups) based on some form of evidence; evaluation refers to the examination of non-person centred factors such as organisations, curricula and teaching methods.” (Watkins, 2007, p. 14)

Within the Agency project, therefore the working definition used to refer to assessment was as follows:

“(...) the ways teachers and other people, involved in a pupil’s education, systematically collect and then use information about that pupil’s level of achievement and/or development in different areas of their educational experience (academic, behaviour and social).” (Watkins, 2007, p. 14)

The project Assessment in Inclusive Settings started in 2004 as a result of Representative Board Members’ agreement to address this area of concern, and was carried out during two main phases: Phase 1 (2005-2006) and Phase 2 (2006-2008); whilst Phase 1 looked at the what and the why of assessment, Phase 2 looked at the who and the how of inclusive assessment.

The end point of Phase 1 was a discussion and then an explanation of what inclusive assessment meant and the production of a series of recommendations for inclusive assessment policy and practice. The goal of Phase 2 was to develop, but also to go deeper into the findings from Phase 1 and investigate how inclu-
sive assessment could be put into practice. This was done via an in depth examination of how recommendations and principles of good practice were put into action in selected case study sites.

The two phases of the project involved different countries. The first Phase involved 23 countries: Austria, Belgium (Flemish and French speaking communities), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, the German Bundesländer, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (England) and it focused on primary education. Finland, Ireland and UK (Wales) joined in the second Phase of the project which was then expanded to also consider assessment in secondary education.

2.1. Methodology

The methodology chosen to carry out the project included a series of activities: documentary analysis of current literature review concerning assessment in inclusive settings, case study visits to schools or clusters of schools that had been selected for their innovative examples of practice and the reflections and the changes carried out by local site staff as a response to experts’ inputs and recommendations.

The investigation activities carried out during the two phases of the project were different. Phase 1 included a series of more general activities which sought to collect information and data concerning assessment issues both at an international and national level. The first activity was a short literature review (co-ordinated by the project staff team) looking at assessment in primary inclusive education settings in non-European countries. The review presented literature describing legislative frameworks and possible purposes of assessment and developments in assessment practice. The second activity was a collection of Country Reports concerning assessment policies and practice in Agency member countries. These reports were prepared by the nominated project experts in collaboration with Agency Representative Board Members and National Coordinators.

The Country Reports provided descriptions of assessment policy and practice evident in the country, as well as explanations as to some of the reasons why policy and practice has developed in the way it has. Each of the Country Reports attempted to highlight the features of best practice in assessment in inclusive classrooms and the features of assessment policy (general and special education) that support best assessment practice. Phase 1 primarily sought to address the following questions: 1. identify the purposes of and approaches to assessment in inclusive settings; 2. identify what challenges countries have in common and what innovations they are introducing in relation to assessment that supports inclusion; 3. highlight European level recommendations that emerge from the national level information. At the end of Phase 1, a summary report (see Watkins, 2007) was produced containing the main findings and a description of those principles that appear to underpin assessment policy and practice that supports inclusion.

Phase 2 was concerned with the actual visits (two visits for each case study) of nominated national experts to five selected educational sites.

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4 In addition to the summary report a «Recommendations Matrix» was developed. This tool provides a concise description of the most important recommendations to develop inclusive assessment in four areas: mainstream class teachers, school organisation, specialist assessment teams and assessment policies. The «Recommendation Matrix» can be downloaded from the following website: http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/assessment-in-inclusive-settings/assessment-in-inclusive-education-files/matrix.doc
that were found to be in some way innovative in relation to inclusive assessment practice. During the visits, participants had the opportunity to see school settings and discuss examples of assessment practice. The aim of these visits was to see school settings and observe assessment practice in situ which concerned: supporting teachers; organising schools; methods and tools for involving different «actors» in assessment processes. During these meetings, input was collected providing suggestions on how to develop good practice and also how inclusive assessment could be implemented.

The nominated case study sites were: Austria, Reutte District Resource Centre in the province of Tirol; Denmark, Peder Lykke School in cooperation with the Educational-psychological Advisory Service (PPR) of Copenhagen; France, schools in Montluçon; Germany, State Outreach Centre for Visually Impaired, LFS-Schleswig; UK (England), Cavendish School in Runcorn and the mainstream school partners in Cheshire. Rather than case study sites being single schools, these five sites all covered a number of schools or education centres.

The reasons why these case study sites were selected were different as each country chosen for the visits was different in terms of assessment policy and legislation concerning pupils with special educational needs. However, they had one particular aspect in common: they all attempted to implement innovations which could promote the full participation of pupils identified as having special educational needs in assessment policies and practice. Below a short description of the five selected case studies sites is provided. In addition, it is important to remember that these case studies sites were also chosen as a result of the willingness of education ministries to nominate local educational sites as potential participants to the project.

2.1.1. Reutte centre (Austria)

The Reutte centre supports all primary and secondary schools in a rural district with about 30,000 inhabitants overall. There have been no special schools in Reutte for ten years, and this is essentially unique for a country like Austria where special schools play a fundamental role for the education of pupils identified as having special educational needs. In contrast, in Reutte all students are included in mainstream classes — with no exception. The participants to the project decided to focus their study on investigating how to enhance assessment procedures for pupils with severe disabilities.

2.1.2. Peder Lykke School and the Educational-psychological Advisory Service – PPR (Denmark)

The Danish team decided to focus the observation on the results of a joint project designed to promote the participation of pupils with behavioural difficulties in the process of learning. The joint project was carried out between a mainstream school — Peder Lykke — and the local school Educational-psychological Advisory Service (PPR). The school practitioners and the staff of the PPR were interested in investigating and developing co-operation between pupils, families and school staff necessary to improve assessment procedures for pupils with SEN. In particular, the mainstream school and the PPR attempted to eliminate those attitudes amongst the teachers who expected that pupils with behavioural difficulties and problems of contact and well-being should only be referred to special courses outside the classroom in order to be «cured».

The visits and the observations in Peder Lykke focused on new methods for cooperation between school and home. Mainstream teachers were engaged more in the process of integrating pupils with difficulties. This meant that the concrete goals put forward for the pupils and their families at the PPR courses were being followed up by the child’s own teachers in the classrooms.

2.1.3. Montluçon schools (France)

The site was composed of four to five schools from kindergarten to end of primary school,
one secondary school and one upper secondary school (from 15 to 18 years old pupils).

All schools had a long-term experience of inclusion of children with special needs. In secondary schools, the process of mainstreaming pupils with special educational needs mostly concerned pupils with visual and motor disabilities. In this cluster of schools there was a long tradition of very successful partnership between schools and resource centres (e.g. care centres or special schools). All schools and resource centres attempted to implement few innovative practices. Participants to the project were particularly keen in investigating ways of co-ordinating assessment procedures across schools, multi-professional teams and inspectors to promote the full participation of pupils with SEN.

2.1.4. LFS-Schleswig (Germany)

The State Resource Centre for Visually Impaired, Schleswig (LFS-Schleswig) was selected as the case study for Germany. LFS-Schleswig offered support and training to families and professionals serving blind and low vision children and young adults, including those with additional disabilities throughout the Land of Schleswig-Holstein. It was a «school without students» – a resource centre that supported about 850 students from birth to adult life in different schools in Schleswig-Holstein.

The profile of the site fulfilled the criteria mentioned for being selected as the centre’s concept was to provide special services in the least restrictive environment. In addition the centre’s main focus was on inclusive settings. It covered all schools in the Land of Schleswig-Holstein and provided services to students, teachers, parents and other professionals dealing with the education of visually impaired students.

2.1.5. Cavendish School (UK)

Cavendish School was situated in Runcorn in the North-West of England and it was selected as the case study site for the UK (England). The school catered for up to 81 pupils aged 2 to 19 years, with severe and complex learning difficulties. The school had excellent links with local mainstream schools. Cavendish school staff not only worked on inclusion projects involving pupils at their school, but they also aimed to provide expertise and support for mainstream school staff working with pupils with special needs education in their mainstream classrooms. The school was interested in investigating how they could develop their work as a centre of expertise in assessment (providing information, resource and perhaps in-service training) for their partner mainstream school staff and parents.

As in previous Agency projects, the use of case studies as a means of collecting information and then analysing this information, was crucial. The specific methodology used for this project, however, attempted to go a step further in that project experts and site staff managed to work together throughout Phase 2. The possibility of visiting the case study sites twice and of using an on-line tool strengthened collaboration between project experts and site staff. Thus, during the first round of case study visits project experts carried out observations of practice in situ and sought to understand the main issues as emerging from the observations and the interactions with local practitioners. During the second round of case study visits instead, project experts and site staff could implement suggestions and recommendations on sites. Between the two rounds of visits, an Implementation Phase was also carried out. It consisted in project experts and site staff keeping in contact using an on-line tool, especially designed for the project. The on-line tool essentially consisted in a web forum moderated by Agency staff which allowed case studies sites participants and project experts to communicate. On the one hand, practitioners could ask for advice and support. On the other hand, project experts could provide site staff with examples of recommendations on how to implement suggestions into practice. These examples could also include documents, links to web areas as well as academic articles.

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6 The Centre changed its name and designation from State School for the Visually Impaired to the new name in August 2008.
containing examples of inclusive assessment methods and tools developed in project experts’ countries of origin.

2.2. Common thinking

Despite the different historical, political and cultural backgrounds, a main question to be addressed by Agency country representatives (i.e. Representative Board Members and National Coordinators) was how to move from a deficit (mainly medically based) assessment approach to an educational or interactive approach. The reasoning behind this focus was a perception shared by countries that a medical approach to assessment increases the chances of segregation by focussing on a pupil’s «deficiencies». By contrast an educational approach can increase the chance of successful inclusion by considering a pupil’s strengths and applying assessment information directly to strategies for teaching and learning.

Moreover, supporting an educational approach to assessment allowed Agency countries to shift the attention from pupils’ functional limitations to the analysis of assessment tools, policies and procedures and how these could support or alternatively hinder the learning of all pupils. In line with this educational approach, pupils with special educational needs were not to be excluded from assessment procedures but it was assessment procedures and tools that needed to be modified. Such an approach also moved away from assessment leading to a statement of diagnosis only, towards assessment procedures that provided recommendations for teaching and learning.

3. Main findings

Many scholars (Slee, 1993; Ainscow, 1999; Armstrong, 2002; Slee, 2007) have identified assessment (along with pedagogy and curriculum) as one of the most important factors for the development of inclusion. Similarly, Agency country representatives have highlighted the use of assessment in mainstream settings as a key area of concern for the development of inclusive education generally. It is recognised in all countries that assessment can impact upon the educational chances of all pupils and often determine exclusion or inclusion. Information gathered through the Assessment Country Reports7 as well as through the feedback collected during project meetings, indicates that assessment plays a crucial role in promoting the process of learning of all pupils — including those with special educational needs. However, this is only the case when assessment processes and procedures are organised in light of inclusive principles such as preventing segregation, avoiding (as far as possible) forms of labelling, and focussing on learning and teaching practice that promotes participation in a mainstream setting.

Much in agreement with the above considerations, a series of findings which seem to indicate that assessment procedures and inclusive practice are connected will be discussed below.

3.1. The concept of Inclusive Assessment

A key conclusion of Phase 1 of the Agency project was the identification of the notion of «Inclusive Assessment». In the project Assessment Summary Report inclusive assessment was defined as:

An approach to assessment in mainstream settings where policy and practice are designed to promote the learning of all pupils as far as possible. The overall goal of inclusive assessment is that all assessment policies and procedures should support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all pupils vulnerable to exclusion, including those with SEN. (Watkins, 2007, p. 47)

A central argument was that inclusive assessment practice should give a lead to general assessment practice. Implementing Inclusive Assessment requires that teachers, school managers, other educational professionals and policy makers rethink and re-structure teaching

and learning opportunities in order to improve the education of all pupils:

The principles of inclusive assessment are principles that support teaching and learning with all pupils. Innovative practice in inclusive assessment demonstrates good assessment practice for all pupils. (Watkins, 2007, p. 62)

Also Phase 1 highlighted the necessity of rethinking the focus for educational goals and programmes and, most importantly, of developing understanding of the weaknesses inherent within a purely «testing» approach.

This means that the needs of pupils vulnerable to exclusion, including those with Special Educational Needs, are considered and accounted for within all general as well as special needs education specific assessment policies and that all pupils are entitled to be part of inclusive assessment procedures: those with Special Educational Needs as well as their classmates and peers. It also indicates that all assessment methods and approaches are complementary and inform each other. Inclusive Assessment is based on the general principle of celebrating diversity by identifying and valuing all pupils’ progress and achievements in mainstream settings.

At the same time, another crucial finding emerging from Phase 1 was that the assessment process sought to move away from a «snapshot» approach involving professionals from outside the mainstream classroom, to an on-going process of mainstream teachers, parents and pupils themselves developing an understanding of not just what pupils learn, but also how they learn it. Approaches, methods and tools as well as the people involved in assessment needed to be developed in line with the view that assessment should be seen as a fundamental part of the process of teaching and learning.

3.2. Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning

A significant aspect of Inclusive Assessment in practice that emerged from the on-going discussions with project experts was the concept of Assessment for Learning. References and discussions regarding this concept can be found in the Country Reports on national assessment systems (Watkins, 2007, p. 62). Within these Country Reports, Assessment for Learning emerges as a «qualitative» type of assessment and related assessment procedures. This type of assessment — also referred to as «formative» and «on-going» assessment — is usually carried out in the classrooms by class teachers and professionals that work with the class teacher. It usually refers to assessment procedures that inform teachers about pupils’ learning and guide them to the next steps in planning pupils’ learning and lesson planning.

In the literature reviewed for this project (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black & William, 2002; Harlen, 2007a; Harlen, 2007b; William, 2007; William & Leahy, 2007) the concept of Assessment for Learning has been investigated in more depth. A crucial element which emerged from the literature was the difference between Assessment for Learning (formative, on-going assessment) and Assessment of Learning (summative assessment). In order to differentiate between the two concepts, the following parameters were considered and produced (see Table I):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARAMETERS</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Supporting Learning</td>
<td>Accountability (linked to pre-determined standards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Informs teaching and learning</td>
<td>Collection of information about what has been achieved (a record of marks)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Promotes further steps in learning</td>
<td>Compares with targets that have been pre-established</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Focuses on improving</td>
<td>Focuses on achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develops pupils’ skills of reflection</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pupils</td>
<td>External practitioners</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other school professionals</td>
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(continua)
The key difference between Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning could be mainly identified as the purpose for which teachers and other professionals gather evidence of learning. This does not imply that there should be a choice between Assessment for Learning or Assessment of Learning — both have pedagogical functions that support pupil achievement. As Harlen (2007b) also argues, Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning are:

[...] usually discussed as different purposes of assessment and sometimes, mistakenly, as different kinds of assessment and ones that are somehow opposed to one another. They are certainly different in several important respects, but what should unite them is the aim of making a positive contribution to learning. (Harlen, 2007b, p. 1)

Discussions with project experts indicated that the crucial issue is using the type of assessment that best suits the learning goal and purpose. As William (2007) argues:

The distinction between assessment of learning and assessment for learning is basically about the intention behind the assessment. So, if you’re assessing in order to help you teach better, that’s assessment for learning, and if you’re assessing in order to grade students, to rank them or to give them a score on a test, then that’s assessment of learning. (William, 2007, p. 7)

Although some tools may be the same (e.g. questioning), the key issues emerging from the feedback provided by project experts, case study hosts and teachers indicates that it is necessary to keep in mind that:

- Assessment for Learning aims at improving learning; Assessment of Learning aims at ensuring accountability (of schools and teachers).
- Assessment for Learning explores the potential for learning and indicates the next step to be taken in order to promote learning (e.g. the dynamics of teaching and learning); Assessment of Learning shows what has been already achieved, memorised, absorbed (e.g. a snapshot of the current situation).
- The actors involved in Assessment for Learning are able to provide insights into progress that a pupil has achieved and how the school contributed to this development; the actors involved in Assessment of Learning include professionals who are external to the school situation (e.g. inspectors) and may be required to provide a picture of a school at a particular point in time, but they may not always know the school context and life in the necessary detail.

Overall, Assessment for Learning is concerned with collecting evidence about learning that is used to adapt teaching and plan next educational steps. Evidence about learning is crucial as it indicates if there has been a shift (or not) in the process of learning of a pupil. On the basis of such evidence, teachers can formulate targets/goals and are able to provide pupils with feedback about their learning (see Hattie & Timperly, 2007) clearly indicating to a pupil not just what they need to learn, but also giving them information on how best they can learn it; therefore contributing to a pupils’ reflection on their own learning.

3.3. Assessment for learning and pupils with special educational needs

Within the research literature reviewed for this investigation, Assessment for Learning is often described as involving a form of self-reflection, or more specifically, as a means by which pupils reflect on their own learning as they are engaged in an interactive «feedback loop» with their teachers. This is clearly presented by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) who describes Assessment for Learning as:
Thus, two main areas were debated by project experts:
1. Does Assessment for Learning mean the same thing for pupils with and without special educational needs? Are we talking about the same principles?
2. Are there differences in the use of Assessment for Learning for pupils with and without special educational needs? If so what are these differences for: pupils, teachers, school managers and educational practice?

During the second case study visit of the second Phase of the project, experts from different member countries were required to focus on a series of issues concerning principles, policies and practice (e.g. tools, actors, settings) necessary to apply assessment for learning to pupils with special educational needs. Experts and case studies hosts and practitioners therefore met and discussed a series of examples drawn from observation as well as from the literature, including the Country Reports. In particular during the second case study visits, project experts and participants identified different interrelated topics to address during the discussions and emerging from the observations in situ:

1. teacher training in and for assessment;
2. organising sites for inclusive assessment;
3. methods, tools and people involved in inclusive assessment.

These prioritised thematic areas attempted to answer the following questions:
– What is the site’s assessment ethos? Is this outlined in a school development plan?
– Which actors are involved in the assessment procedures? What are pupils’ and parents’ roles?
– Which methods and tools for assessment may promote inclusion?
– What is the degree of flexibility of these methods and tools for assessment?
– How is assessment information used to inform teaching?
– Do individual educational plans contain indications about how to promote learning and how to inform teaching?
- What is the role of national standards on the assessment procedures?
- What is the «legal validity/status» of test results for all pupils?
- Are «alternative» assessments (i.e. modifications or accommodations to make assessments accessible in different ways) being used? If so, what?

The main reflections emerging from these questions are presented below.

Evidence collected through debates and discussions with project experts suggested that:

[...'] in principle there are no differences between pupils with SEN and pupils without SEN. All pupils no matter what ability they have, all have the same human rights. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

and:

[...] what is a definition of SEN? All pupils have needs, why do we differentiate? [...]. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

That said one potential area of concern was highlighted in relation to using Assessment for Learning with pupils with the most severe needs. In particular, engaging pupils with profound learning difficulties in the «feedback» loop was seen as being more challenging.

Many project experts indicated that the:

[...] collection of information and evidence of learning is not an easy task [...]. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

However, project experts' reflections on this potential difficulty can be summed up as follows:

[...] students with profound difficulties do not need different assessment systems but only different methods/tools of assessment. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

When issues about pedagogy were discussed, project experts indicated that the principles behind pedagogy for pupils with special educational needs were not fundamentally different from those for pupils without special educational needs. The focus of change is upon the degree and the intensity of teaching and learning methods and the task of the teacher is to investigate alternative procedures and forms of adaptation:

[...] All children have needs, some children have special needs. What is good for SEN is good work for all pupils. The better the quality of education the more pupils with SEN can be included. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

In particular, active approaches — problem solving actively engaging pupils in teaching and learning processes — were considered as crucial strategies to be used in conjunction with Assessment for Learning:

[...] such pedagogy is very important; we need to encourage this with our pupils with SEN. They can or have had decisions taken away/made for them with regard to individual progress/assessment. Where possible and appropriate, pupils should be involved. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

Project experts reported that often examples of such interactive approaches are difficult to find, particularly in secondary education. It was acknowledged that:

[...] in primary grades teachers use such pedagogy more often than in higher grades. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

Often such approaches have been explicitly used as a means of promoting meta-cognitive skills for pupils with special educational needs:

[...] we often use the process of meta-cognition with pupils with SEN, and not with other pupils and this is a pity. (Experts' discussions, 2008)

The essential aim of employing the «feedback loop» within Assessment for Learning is to promote pupils’ meta-cognition; that is their own understanding of not just what they learn, but how they learn and can learn in the best way.

The most crucial outcome emerging from the discussions highlighted above therefore is that Assessment for Learning is a significant element in successful teaching and learning of teaching with all pupils, including those with SEN. In essence, the critical question to ask is not whether Assessment for Learning can be applied to pupils with special educational needs, but rather how it can be applied. Therefore, there was enough evidence that Assessment for Learning for pupils with and without special educational needs was based on the same principles and that the only difference in Assessment for Learning between pupils with and without special educational needs is essentially in the type of tools
3.4. Assessment for Learning and pupils with special educational needs – Tools

Considering the difficulty to apply assessment for learning to pupils with special educational needs, the Agency project attempted to provide practitioners and other stakeholders with information about which tools could be developed and used. A relevant work in this area has also been conducted by the Welsh Assembly Government which produced a tool specifically designed to collect evidence of learning for pupils with complex and profound needs.8

In relation to tools for Assessment for Learning, project experts’ feedback indicates that many Assessment for Learning approaches (such as individualised observation, portfolios and diaries) have been extensively used in special needs education settings for considerable time:

[...] I think we already use these tools with pupils with SEN. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

In relation to other potential methods and tools it is necessary to underline the fact that Assessment for Learning methods and tools can be used with pupils with SEN providing that they are modified and adjusted to meet the needs of the individual pupil:

[...] the tools are the same but they must be adjusted to the cognitive level, social abilities (more or less concrete, little steps) of the pupils. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

As far as teachers’ day-by-day (on-going)9 assessment is concerned, project experts agreed that this type of assessment should be applied to pupils with SEN. They also reported that such a tool was used in most Agency countries and that it provides the teacher with the best opportunity for collecting information about pupils’ learning. Such an approach puts the emphasis on small steps of pupil development:

[...] on-going assessment provides an opportunity to view very small steps on a continual basis and this informs future teaching and learning. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

[...] it is necessary to assess day-by-day as it is important for the child and for the teacher to get information about the planned achievement. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

Teacher observation was seen by project experts as a main method for gathering Assessment for Learning information. This approach is seen as particularly relevant for pupils with special educational needs as it may be the only method available to gather information about the learning of pupils who use non- or pre-verbal forms of communication:

[...] observation is essential as very often it is the only way to establish pupils’ responses. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

[...] it is very important for SEN pupils where written work and speech aren’t always possible and responses to different stimuli — a person, sound, smell, environment — can be observed. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

However, the inputs from project experts suggested that teachers needed to be given more guidance by specialists in order to improve their observation techniques. Specifically, project experts indicated that more guidance should be given to develop more programmed and individualised methods of observation of pupils with SEN:

[...] teachers should have more guidance given by the specialists/experts on how and what to observe in different cases (blind, deaf, communication disorders). (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

[...] observation should be more structured and teachers should have more time to reflect on this. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

Some suggestions included the use of videos as helpful tools to collect evidence of learning for students with profound learning difficulties.

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and to provide teachers with the best opportunities to reflect upon assessment and discuss about the evidence with their colleagues.

Questioning is often a crucial part of the teacher pupil interaction that occurs in the Assessment for Learning feedback loop. Project experts indicated that questioning pupils with special educational needs is also possible — and necessary — but only:

[...] if the questions are framed in a way that allows pupils to have enough time to answer (the «wait time») and if different stimuli to support questions (e.g. visual versus verbal stimuli) and ways of responding (e.g. eye contact) are considered. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

In summary:

[...] questioning is one of the most important tools in our hand to communicate with a child with special educational needs, but the function and the type of question can be different. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

Similarly, the use of dialogue in Assessment for Learning is critical. Some project experts suggested that it is not possible to use «traditional» dialogue with pupils with SEN:

[traditional] dialogue is valid where communication is based on verbal responses, but this is not always possible. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

In such circumstances, the teacher must be able to implement changes to the means and tools for communication.

Concerning the use of other Assessment for Learning tools, project experts highlighted that portfolios were currently used within many Agency countries for pupils with SEN:

[...] a portfolio is a good way to find the best way of learning. [...] it is an empowering tool. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

Portfolios can aid dialogue with pupils, supporting their self-assessment:

[...] it is a good reflective method for all students to own [...] pupils can see their progression and be proud [...] [a] portfolio enhances creative self-reflective competences on the part of the child. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

In addition, project experts also indicated that the portfolio — if complemented with information, for example the pupil’s IEP or specialist therapeutic programmes — could be a tool for dialogue with other professionals and parents. Similarly, the use of diaries was cited by some project experts as a useful tool in Assessment for Learning:

[...] what have I done today? The diary encourages self-reflection, however it is necessary to use other forms of communication not only language. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

In conclusion, project experts expressed the view that approaches that encourage self-assessment and particularly self-reflection are tools within Assessment for Learning providing that they are adequately adapted and modified to meet the needs of individual pupils.

Generally it was felt that there are clear examples of where such approaches are being successfully used with good results. In fact, project experts expressed the view that the special needs education sector can offer a lead to the mainstream sector in tools for Assessment for Learning:

[...] needs to learn from SEN settings and see how this can be used for the mainstream. SEN [can] give tips to the mainstream. (Experts’ discussions, 2008)

Finally, the reinforcement of self-assessment skills is a crucial goal for pupils with severe learning difficulties whose personal learning targets may often include autonomy and independence. These competences are fundamental skills clearly supported by the development of self-reflection and meta-cognitive skills (Porter et al., 2000).

4. Implementing Inclusive Assessment

Implementing Inclusive Assessment presents a series of challenges. A main concern outlined by Agency countries is the likely effects of international, comparative studies of educational standards – most notably the OECD PISA studies (www.pisa.oecd.org). There are increasing national level pressures for greater accountability in education — at national, regional and also school levels — leading to an increasing emphasis on using information on pupils’ academic performance as a factor in directing educational policy making.
As also indicated in the Assessment Summary Report (Watkins, 2007) the emphasis on raising standards (e.g. PISA studies) based on pre-determined levels of attainments which do not take into account student’s progress, is one of the main barriers that assessment for learning is currently facing. Moreover, as a result of this emphasis on standardised performances, many countries across Europe tend to exclude children with special educational needs both from assessment procedures and practices (see national reports) either on the basis of students deficiency, or in the attempt to «protect» them from the frustration of not being able to take the test. In most countries, accommodations and modifications of assessment procedures are guaranteed, especially for students with sensory impairments (e.g. use of Braille, computer facilities, interpreting, more time). These alternate assessments allow some learners to overcome a technical barrier and show what they know or can do without the impediment of that barrier. However, modifying or «accommodating» mainstream assessments that are used for pupils without impairments, class or even school evaluation, appraisal and accountability is only an alteration (or modification) in the way a general assessment is done or test is applied, whilst the fundamental structure of the assessment procedures has not been reconsidered in light of inclusive principles. Put simply, the purpose is selection and judgment of pupils’ achievements against pre-determined standards, including those pupils with sensory impairments, but no attempt is made to modify standardised forms of assessment (both for learning and of learning).

Taking an inclusive turn (Ainscow, 2007) particularly in the area of assessment is a struggle and a challenge, especially when considering current international pressures on accountability for schools. What could be implemented though, is an attitude towards change (Ainscow and Booth, 1998), each country according to its economic, political and cultural background. Keeping in mind those reflections, the Agency project highlighted some essential prerequisites or meta issues which were crucial to put recommendations into practice. These meta-issues consisted of observations, discussions and reflections emerging during and after the case study visits and which were apparent across all case study sites (in varying ways and to different degrees). Two factors were identified as crucial for the implementation of inclusive assessment policy and practice in mainstream settings:

- **infrastructure**: the structures, policies and support systems for assessment;
- **shared value systems**: the attitudes, professional values and beliefs that underpin a school’s educational culture and approach.

Similarly, among the essential meta-issues, the following factors resulted fundamental from the project findings:

### 4.1. Educational policy that facilitates innovative practice

This includes the participation in local decision-making that involved all stakeholders in assessment; flexibility within policies and systems that encouraged innovation and change in the implementation of assessment policy and practice; the active involvement of policy makers in the identification and mobilisation of existing human, physical and financial resources to ensure that local decision-making and innovation in assessment policy and practice could occur.

### 4.2. A move towards «inter»-disciplinary rather than just «multi»-disciplinary working

Inter-disciplinary assessment integrates the knowledge and perspectives of different areas of professional expertise in order to consider issues holistically. This is not the same as a multi-disciplinary approach where professionals from different disciplines work alongside each other, but not necessarily within an integrated and agreed single approach.

### 4.3. Leadership and vision

Policies that facilitate innovation have to be initiated and formulated by key groups or in-
4.4. Positive attitudes towards meeting diversity in education

At the core of a shared value system that supports inclusive assessment is the view that diversity in education is a beneficial thing that all school stakeholders should acknowledge.

4.5. Reflective practice

Reflective practice can be seen to be crucial for innovation. It is essentially underpinned by a problem solving approach that ultimately builds up to an evidence-based approach to practice. This can also be seen to be empowering for teachers as this involves them in the process of goal setting and review that helps in validating their own practice. School leaders in particular highlighted the role of «critical friends» as being important; that is external people or organisations that worked with a school, or group of teachers to help them in the process of reflecting on their practice.

5. The Cyprus Recommendations on Inclusive Assessment

The project (Phase 2) led to a series of recommendations to policy makers and practitioners for developing assessment processes that support inclusion. These recommendations were disseminated during the international conference of Cyprus. More than 150 participants representing 30 countries met during the Conference «Assessment in Inclusive Settings» organised jointly by the Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education in Limassol, Cyprus, on 23rd and 24th October 2008.

Recommendations included the following issues: the crucial role played by pupils and parents in the process of assessment; the teachers’ commitment in using assessment as a tool to improve learning; the need to stress the responsibility of school managers and the need to improve the collaboration among multi-disciplinary teams. Finally, it emerged that it was important to support the enactment and the passing of general policies and legislation that enabled the participation of all pupils, including those identified as having special educational needs.

6. Outline of indicators for Inclusive Assessment

The project highlighted an outline of indicators for the development of Inclusive Assessment. At the same time, the project also indicated that the development of suitable indicators for each country required the presence of a series of preconditions, fundamental prerequisites for the development of critical indicators.

The project identified seven main indicators at the level of pupils and their participation in the decision making process, parents and their involvement in assessment procedures, teachers and their use of assessment as a tool for learning, schools and their support for all pupils, multi-disciplinary assessment teams and their capacity to collaborate, and finally, the flexibility of policy and the input towards innovation and change for legislation.

All materials which were produced during the activities of Phase 2 of the project can be downloaded from the Agency website.

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10 An outline of all indicators and of the preconditions which need to be produced in order to develop these indicators can be found in the Outline of Indicators for Inclusive Assessment paper. A copy of this discussion paper can be downloaded at: http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/docs/assessment_indicators_en.pdf (last accessed: September 2009).

7. Conclusions

The Agency project «Assessment in Inclusive Settings» led to the conclusion that assessment is an essential area for the development of inclusive education and that policy makers and practitioners alike could re-consider their policies and practice in the light of inclusive assessment principles.

Despite the very different starting points and challenges, all countries and in particular the five countries selected as case studies for this project, genuinely provided examples of how they could make their systems of assessment more inclusive by celebrating the diversity of all pupils including those identified as having special educational needs.

All of the contributions from the project experts were unanimous — the concept of Assessment for Learning as currently understood by countries, but — most importantly for this debate — also as described in the research literature is valid for all pupils: including those with special educational needs.

From the discussions held with experts, this argument can be developed further — Assessment for Learning concerns all pupils and from an inclusive perspective there should not be any need to differentiate between pupils with or without special educational needs, but rather to differentiate classroom practice to meet all pupils’ requirements.

Building on this assertion, four main findings should be highlighted.

1. The same principles of Assessment for Learning apply for pupils with or without special educational needs.
2. The only difference in Assessment for Learning between pupils with and without special educational needs is essentially in the type of tools and assessment/communication methods used by teachers.
3. The only area of concern relating to Assessment for Learning being applied to pupils with special educational needs relates to the notion of Assessment for Learning as a tool for pupils’ reflection on their own learning (i.e. the interaction between the pupil and teacher during the «feedback loop»). For pupils who use alternative forms of communication, this feedback process cannot operate in the «traditional» language based way. In this case, a more individualised approach, new assessment tools and a variety of means for teacher/pupil interaction need to be explored and implemented; for example close observation in structured situations which allows staff to assess pupils likes/dislikes, etc.
4. Many methods and tools of Assessment for Learning have been developed within special needs education settings and could be transferred into mainstream settings to improve educational provision for all pupils.

In summary, Assessment for Learning can and should be applied to all pupils, including those with special educational needs, providing that the relevant and necessary changes and modifications are made (as indicated in the section «Tools») in order to ensure the individual pupil’s fully participation in the assessment process.

It is clear that the discussions relating to the concept of Assessment for Learning within the remit of the Agency Assessment project have only provided a starting point. More detailed examination — research and also the wider dissemination of examples of good practice in applying Assessment for Learning to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs — is needed in the future.

It is hoped however, that the reflections from project experts as well as their assertion of the usefulness of the concept in supporting the learning processes of all pupils will inform the work and decision making of educational policy makers and practitioners across Europe.
REFERENCES
